

One of the qualities we most notice about the Fourth Gospel is the driving motif of argument and contention. When you read it in little pieces, as we do each day at Mass, you might just think that Jesus provoked a great deal of argument amongst people. But if ever you sat down and read the whole Gospel through, a much more precise image would burst upon you.

Someone is on trial for his life.

Suddenly it all makes new sense: this is why everybody is being called to bear witness; this is why so many sharp questions are being asked; and never before has the term *cross-examination* been so precise.

At the beginning of the Gospel Jesus is called “the Word”. The Word is full of life, and his life is the light of all who live; he already has an intimate relationship with every man woman and child of us, because all of us came into being through him; without him nothing came into being. No earthly darkness - no human darkness - can contradict his light.

If the Word is on trial for his life, what does that say about those who arraign him: accusing the one through whom they themselves were made? Indeed, they are threatening to contradict the light, to extinguish the only light by which they can understand themselves.

Jesus points out today that anyone believing in him will be putting their faith in the One who sent him. He is not asking his hearers to desert the faith of their fathers; and there is a place in that faith for messengers to come, sent by God: the prophetic place. But the stories of the prophets are drenched in their own blood, and Jesus knows he is their heir, and will share their fate.

Still, he has no alternative; because he is not a bearer of the word: he *is* the Word, he *is* the message that he must proclaim. His own fate is identical with the fate of his message. But this makes the issue of the trial the most serious issue: will the world - in the shape of the Jews - accept or reject the God they claim to worship, now that he has come in answer to their prayers, now that he has come to share their existence? One thing is clear in the mind of Jesus: that if they reject him, they will turn their back on the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

*I know that his commands mean eternal life.
And therefore what the Father has told me
is what I speak.*